

Media Fellow Report 2005

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The build up

A circular came round at work....BA Media Fellowship. Is that a British Airways sponsored grant, I mused. I read on. BA Media Fellowships provide scientists with the opportunity to experience the media etc. etc. It sounded interesting. Would I be eligible? This was a fellowship for scientists. Did that include clinical psychologists? Hey I am a neuropsychologist that is science, I deal in brains. I rang up for more information. An enthusiastic voice at the other end of the line said, "Yes, certainly, apply". And I did.

Separation anxiety

After I had read the offer, from the BA, to work at The Guardian newspaper, I settled down further into my worn and crumbly NHS chair. I had a sudden avalanche of catastrophic thoughts. "I wrote academic papers and clinical reports. What did I know about writing for the press. What was I really letting myself in for?" Well read on and find out.

The BA had organised a briefing day at the Dana Centre in Kensington to introduce the media fellows to one another, answer questions about the fellowship and provide a simulation of attending a press conference and writing a news story. The other media fellows were all bright, young things from differing science backgrounds. Underneath we all felt unsure so that was a relief. We listened to a 20 minute press briefing and our task was to write a short news piece. I struggled with my news story. I wanted to keep changing the structure and worst of all I couldn't read my hand writing...aah. Not to worry though, my fears were put at rest during discussion time and a chat with Alice Taylor-Gee, the BA Science in Society Officer, who organised the media fellow's placements and briefing day.

The day before I was to start work, I received a call from Alok Jha, science journalist from The Guardian. "Meet Tim Radford at the Royal Institution", he said. "He's easy to spot because he is colour blind for everything but black. He only wears black. There is a press conference there and we thought it would be fun for you to attend". As I was to discover, fun was a major theme of my time at The Guardian. I was about to embark on the fun of learning not only how to be a journalist but also the fun of learning about a diverse range of science topics outside my own field.

Meeting Tim Radford

A tall man, in black of course, greeted me "Hi I'm Tim, come and join me". The Royal Institution Media Centre was a buzz of PR people. "Just sit and relax" Tim told me. I sat right at the front with Tim. He had a microphone which he placed on the speakers' table. That was reassuring I thought. I knew Tim to be a great science journalist but he too had to rely on some memory aids. Tim passed me the press release. The press conference was on stem cells and gene therapy. I was interested to listen and absorb how the science journalists understood and translated complex science. It amused me to discover that they asked simple questions the kind that were also going on in my head. For example, how long a procedure took, what are the implications of this work, how long before the public will receive it. Nothing too technical. This news was for public consumption not high brow academics. I was learning already. Tim introduced me to the other journalists and we had a brief discussion about the conference and who was going to write what. Following the conference we took the bus back to Farringdon, where The Guardian is based. We had a leisurely ride in the August sunshine and got to know a bit about one another. Tim is a wonderful person, not only a great science journalist, but a true renaissance man. He is a font of knowledge and literature. Best of all Tim was not in the least intimidating and indeed looked after me throughout my placement in an avuncular manner.

Being a journalist

On our return to Farringdon we entered a modern rather bland looking building. This was my first taste of the inside workings of this august newspaper. We went up to the first floor. It was open plan and we made our way to the back where a posse of science, health and environment journalists worked. Tim introduced me to everyone and then we embarked on a tour of the paper. Up to second floor where I met the photo editors, back down to the first floor to be introduced to the science editor.

My introduction to finding a news story was benign that day. I'd had a romantic impression that I would be off scouring academic departments to tease out the latest research findings. More prosaically, I was introduced to Alpha Gallileo, a computer system that each day provides the latest press releases in science from all over the world. I was excited to start exploring. However, my humiliation was that this was a mac. "How do you work a mac?" I had to ask. I had been used to PCs and couldn't even get into the system on this machine. Tim came to my rescue and soon I was gaily surfing oceans of science stories. Once inside it was as if I'd found a magical sea cave of sparkling news items. My first job was to find something of interest for the Life Section of The Guardian which was printed every Thursday. I got distracted reading the New York Times but was soon back on track. I picked a story about unmanned flying spy robots. It was a story from a scientist in

the States. So my next task was to get on the phone and find out more. I felt great after my conversation I'd picked up some really interesting facts and quotes for a good story. I was pleased.

Each day at The Guardian was different. My next press conference was based at Imperial College located beside the Science Museum. Imperial College is an impressive modern building of light and glass built for the 21st century. Tim and I attended a conference sponsored by NASA about climactic and geological conditions on Enceladus, a satellite moon of Saturn. We learnt that Enceladus had a hot bottom. After the conference we were given lunch and I mingled with the other journalists. I was beginning to feel like a real journo as there were people I recognised from the Times, The Independent and another media fellow.

I attended two major press interviews with Tim. The first was at The Science Museum, where we interviewed one of the curators about a forthcoming exhibition on Aliens. I learnt all about different types of Aliens and was able to ask this expert a long-burning question as to the possibility of extraterrestrial life. We were also personally shown around a current exhibition about the Spitfire during World War II. What an enjoyable job this really is. The second interview was conducted at The Natural History Museum. I think this was the pièce de resistance for me. The museum is composed of beautiful stone carvings of lizards and other strange insects crawling up the walls. The Darwin Centre, which houses the insects at the museum was being refurbished so all the insects were on the move to a different location, while renovations were taking place. We were shown into the bowels of the museum and confronted with racks and racks of carefully documented and preserved insects. This time we met up with the science photographer from The Guardian who took some stunning shots of beautiful, iridescent, blue butterflies. The curator brought out a dusty tray of insects to let me hold. "These", he informed me, "are the insects Darwin himself collected". Well you can't get much better than this.

Over the three weeks that I was at The Guardian I wrote three stories for the section 'This Week', which picks up stories in the news that week and comments on the stories. These were short stories and I learnt how to translate academic science into short, sharp, simple but interesting and engaging articles for a deadline. No obfuscation here.

A final press conference that I attended at the British Medical Association, confirmed my status as a news journalist. I was early, and met up with the camera and sound crew from Sky News. This was exciting as we were going to be on television. I asked my first question of the press panel. I felt launched and my confidence grew and I wrote an editorial based on the press conference, which introduced to me to another form of news journalism.

The Dublin Experience

My final week was spent at the BA Festival of Science in Dublin. It was fun to meet up with the other media fellows and hear of their experiences. The BA Festival consists of press briefings from early in the morning into the evening, so it was a hectic time for the journalists going from one press briefing to another. The skills I had learnt at The Guardian were used in helping Wendy Barnaby, from the BA, write stories for the BA web site.

Finally

Overall, this experience has provided me with the writing skills to translate and communicate science, to understand what is news and how to get a news story to the public. Since returning to my clinical job I have begun working with the media as a member of the British Psychological Society (BPS) Press Committee, where I will be involved in writing press releases for the BPS. Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the BA, The Guardian and Tim Radford for their support and efforts to help myself and other scientists in learning how to communicate science.

Publications

The Guardian:

What do books do for the brain? This Week, Life Section, The Guardian , p2, 18.08.05

Do I need to worry about my wonky elbows? This Week, Life Section, The Guardian, p3, 18.08.05

How do you detect a fake? This Week, Life Section, The Guardian, p3, 25.08.05

Screening. Doctors know best. Editorial. The Guardian, p23, 25.08.05

The British Association of Science:

Flying reptiles. The BA Festival of Science Web site 15.10.05